

# **Refugees and access to Vocational Education and Training across Europe: a case of protection of white privilege?**

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## **Abstract**

This small-scale, highly original study connects themes which are rarely explored in relation to each other, particularly in a European context: vocational education and training (VET), refugees and race equality, in order to explore how VET policies impact on racial equality, and the ways racial structures in Europe impact on VET. It begins to fill important gaps in cross-European research, firstly around VET and race, and secondly around refugees and VET. The paper is based on a study which examined the meso-social benefits of, and barriers to VET for adult refugees to European countries, commissioned by CEDEFOP, the agency funded by the European Commission to promote the development of VET in the European Union. In the paper we argue that a key factor in shaping refugees' experiences of VET, are the racial structures integral to capitalist societies. Innovatively drawing on key literature which analyses white privilege in the labour market to contextualise our findings, we suggest that barriers faced by refugees are potentially related to structures of white privilege which shape notions of work and workers in Europe and sustain racial hierarchies.

**Keywords:** Vocational training and inequalities; European VET; race; white privilege; refugees.

## **Introduction**

This study connects themes which are rarely explored in relation to each other, particularly in a European context: vocational education and training, refugees and race equality (Mojab 2000, 2006; Niedrig and Seukwa 2010), in order to explore how vocational education and training (VET) policies impact specifically on racial equality, and the ways racial structures in Europe impact on VET policies. Whilst there has been much research on VET in general across Europe, VET and race inequalities is an area which remains under-researched, and in particular, there is a paucity of studies on VET and white privilege. Equally, there is little European research on refugees' access to, and experience of, VET. In this article we argue that a key factor in shaping refugees' experiences of, and access to, VET, are the racial structures integral to capitalist societies. In this small-scale but highly original study, we draw on global literature which analyses white privilege in the labour market to contextualise our findings, and argue, perhaps somewhat controversially, that barriers faced by refugees are

potentially related to structures and discourses of white privilege which shape notions of work and workers in Europe and sustain racial hierarchies. We conclude by calling for further research in this field to enable a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of VET and issues of race in Europe.

The paper is based on a research project (2010-11) which examined the meso-social benefits of, and barriers to VET for adult refugees to European countries. The project was commissioned by CEDEFOP (the Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle), the European Agency funded by the European Commission to promote the development of VET in the European Union and brought together experts from different European countries (UK, Germany, Romania, Italy, Denmark) to share knowledge. Refugees as a group were identified by CEDEFOP because there is little European research on their experiences of VET. There is a large amount of information, both on refugees and on VET (mostly as two separate, unrelated themes) in individual countries and individual organisations, however, what is missing is a cross European study and analysis. This research begins to fill that gap.

This study is not a traditional comparative study. It touches on VET policies, frameworks and arrangements for refugees, and racial minorities' and refugees' experiences of education systems. Comparisons of VET systems across countries remain largely underdeveloped (OECD 2010). Particularly studies of the eastern European post-Communist countries, but also, somewhat surprisingly, of southern European countries are comparatively rare (Riddell and Weedon 2012). In this paper, we do not claim to provide a comprehensive review of European research on the topic. Rather we have reviewed the literature available, although we are limited to research written in English and German due to our own linguistic restrictions. The databases we consulted to provide a review of the literature were Proquest, Wiley Interscience, Ingenta, Google and Google Scholar. Our primary search terms were 'VET', 'Vocational Education', 'Vocational Training', 'Adult Education', combined with secondary search terms 'refugees', 'race', 'racism', 'whiteness', 'white supremacy', 'white privilege'. We begin with a brief description of the different VET systems in the countries which we investigated.

## **VET systems**

VET refers to very different systems across the developed world, and takes place in different kinds of institutions and workplaces, and in different arrangements (OECD 2010). The same profession may require a university degree in one country, but require an apprenticeship in another. In this study, we specifically explore issues experienced by adult refugees, rather than young people, and thus focus on continuing VET rather than initial VET systems.

In Germany and Denmark, the VET system is regulated by the state (Sabates et al 2010). It is primarily targeted at young people, who select a vocational track in secondary education (ReferNet 2012). These countries have a dual system of VET, which involves practical training by companies, supplemented by theoretical training at vocational colleges. VET within these countries has a relatively high status and tends to be regarded as a good alternative to an academic education (Preston and Green 2008; Leise 2007).

The vocational systems in Romania and Italy are in the process of moving towards a more market-led system with some intervention by the state (Sabates et al 2010). They are integrated into the education system for young people, who select a vocational route as part of their secondary studies. However in these countries, which have a more classical education system, which prioritises academic education, vocational education is regarded as low status (Preston and Green 2008; ReferNet Italy 2011; ReferNet Romania 2011).

VET in the UK is market-led (Sabates et al 2010). In comparison to other European countries, there is 'no unified structure and provision is profuse' (European Commission 2012, 38). Provision tends to be accessed post-16 and includes Further Education colleges, apprenticeships, systems of work-based learning, and many vocational courses now require a full degree. University degrees have become increasingly expensive since the introduction of fees in 1998, and now cost up to £9,000 pa. VET in the UK, whilst potentially more flexible than the German or Scandinavian systems, remains low status and difficult to navigate (Sabates et al 2010; Preston and Green 2008).

With such different systems, we might expect different types of inequalities in each system. However, in fact, patterns of inequality tend to be similar across Europe and social inequalities in general are on the increase (Riddell and Weedon 2012), although race as a factor in sustaining these inequalities remains an under-researched area.

## **The experiences of refugees and VET**

In this study we differentiate between refugees and other types of migrants, although much of the literature we consulted does not. Article 1 of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951(as amended by the 1967 protocol)) states a refugee is

a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR 2010)

Asylum seekers go through very complex processes to become officially recognised refugees. Suffice to say these processes are different in each country, and vary according to the politics of the time. During these processes, the status, rights and labels assigned to the individual asylum seeker change.

Refugees' experiences of VET have been the focus of only a small amount of academic research. Older research has tended to focus on individuals' barriers to VET such as language problems and lack of confidence (as reported by Archer et al 2005) but more recently there is a recognition of structural and institutional barriers as well. However, even among these studies, very few position the barriers in a wider social framework.

Although most governments do not keep records of unemployment among refugees, there seems to be a consensus that levels are extremely high (Morrice 2007; Beer 2012). Research from the UK (Morrice 2007), Germany (Niedrig and Seukwa 2010) and Sweden and Canada (Mojab 2008) reported that the widespread positioning of refugees as helpless, dependent and passive was leading providers to devalue refugees' prior experience and qualifications and their active attempts to get work and training placements. As Morrice (2007) argues,

[g]overnment lifelong learning policy for refugees has been based on a one-size fits all model which fails to consider the diverse range and backgrounds of refugees, and in particular the needs of highly qualified and professional refugees. The focus has been to

deliver a narrow and prescriptive curriculum which assumes refugees come to the UK with few or no skills and qualifications which can be nurtured and built upon (p. 157).

Research from Australia and the UK examines tutor attitudes as a barrier to education and training, and suggests there is a lack of awareness among university tutors that students had refugee backgrounds, and if they were aware, some were unwilling to make necessary concessions or compromises (Hannah 2003). The same study also revealed the patronising attitude of some tutors at universities in the UK, and reported discrimination against those students regarded as less likely to find employment at the end of a course, since British universities are judged on the success rate of their graduates at attaining employment (Hannah 2003). Employers' attitudes, including fear of cultural differences, have also been identified as an issue in the UK (Phillimore and Goodson 2006).

A further significant barrier explored is the work of Information, Advice and Guidance agencies. A German study suggests that placement agencies often categorise migrants as 'unplaceable' (NTN 2009), and studies conducted in the UK and Australia suggest that those providing advice are often not sufficiently informed of the equivalency of qualifications gained abroad, leading to individuals being misadvised (Hannah 2003).

Research has also highlighted that dispersal policies for refugees operating in the UK and Germany, which are allegedly intended to spread the cost of supporting refugees across the different national regions, have actually reduced access to education and training opportunities, contributed to deskilling and reduced social cohesion (Boswell 2001; Phillimore and Goodson 2006).

These studies, then, highlight important issues around institutional barriers for refugees accessing VET. However, most did not explicitly identify a wider context for the different barriers, leaving the reader with the impression that refugees experience difficulties simply as a consequence of their refugee status, or due to their own lack of familiarity with systems. Whilst status and familiarity are no doubt issues, a consideration of the wider social context is necessary if we are going to understand in any depth the position of refugees accessing VET.

### **The need to examine issues of race in VET**

VET is often regarded as providing potential benefits for societies beyond narrow labour market functions, such as improved social inclusion and social cohesion (Phillimore and Goodson 2006), although this varies across national contexts. Adult education is equally traditionally characterised as inclusive and learner-centred (as reported by Hannah 2003). Whilst it cannot be denied that this inclusive potential exists in VET, some scholars have argued for a reconsideration of VET systems, arguing that VET, like all education systems, not only constitutes a barrier to social cohesion, but is a key institution of social regulation, (Johnson-Bailey 2006; Preston and Green 2008; Niedrig and Seukwa 2010; Shore 2010). Some also argue that capitalist economies have vested interests in sustaining race inequality, partially achieved by regulating access to the labour market through learning opportunities (Shore 2010; Mojab 2011).

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2006, 2009, 2010, 2012a and b) has identified racism as key to refugees' experiences. It emphasises that race discrimination, both individual and institutional, as defining attitudes and policies towards refugees across Europe. ECRI identifies racist public discourse fuelled by the media portraying asylum seekers and refugees as bogus, exploiters of the systems or criminals, translating into refugee-hostile policies. These include policies such as the introduction of the pushback policy- the turning back of boats coming from Libya when on the open sea by the Italian authorities which denies individuals even the possibility of seeking asylum (ECRI 2012) and the Draft [partial] Immigration and Citizenship Bill (2008) in the UK which makes it an offence for asylum seekers to knowingly enter the UK without a valid travel document (ECRI 2010), and also attitudes and policies which translate into a lack of access to jobs and training for refugees, as we discuss below. Race has also been identified as an issue in policies which aim to restrict numbers of refugees or access to work once they arrive, by scholars such as Back (2003) and Erdemir and Vasta (2007).

Race equality is discussed relatively rarely in literature on VET, even in the US where most studies have been conducted (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 2000a; Ianinska, Wright and Rocco 2003), but even more seldom in European literature, giving the impression that it is not a particularly significant issue. Much of the work which does focus on race restricts itself to providing examples or descriptions of racism. Recent work in the US argues for example, that curriculum materials in adult education continue to be racist (Colin 2010), the style of admissions exams for vocational courses is biased towards white, middle class students

(Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey 2010) racial hierarchies shape classroom dynamics (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 2000b), and leads to stereotyping in classrooms (Ianinska, Wright and Rocco 2003). Whilst being important and relevant, these studies do not fully explore the implications of such race inequality in adult learning for the labour market as a whole and wider social regulation.

There is therefore a need for a critical approach which considers the issue of race equality in VET systems and its implications for wider social and economic reproduction. The notion of white supremacy (sometimes referred to as white privilege or dominance) has been employed by some scholars to analyse and expose a deeply ingrained system of race inequality present in all institutional arrangements and social interaction, even when implicit or unwitting.

White supremacy refers to a set of values and attitudes which ensures disadvantage for those seen as racial minorities, and privileges for those politically designated white (e.g. Ladson-Billings 1998; Gillborn 2005; Wollrad 2005; Preston 2010; Shore 2010). The terms white privilege and white supremacy are often understood as referring to extreme forms of racism such as Neo-Nazism. However, we use it to refer to a racial system of power and privilege so deeply engrained in society it frequently goes unnoticed (by those privileged by it; those oppressed by it tend to be more aware [Wollrad 2005]) and yet is pervading of all social and economic relations. Theories of hegemonic white supremacy thus challenge more common and traditional notions of racism as an aberration or individual act, or an occasional factor which shapes some aspects of behaviour, and argue rather that racism is integral to societal structures and institutions in capitalist societies, and ensures the continuing privilege of whites. Systems and institutions which claim, and appear to be, race neutral and equitable, such as education and training, actually reproduce racial inequality and uphold white privilege (Closson 2010). Such theories, whilst originating in the US, have started to be employed in European contexts to theorise a racism often neglected in national contexts which tend to focus more on citizenship or religion (Garner 2006; Eggers 2009; Love and Vanghese 2012). Indeed, Arndt (2009) writes of a European system of white privilege, shaped by a history of colonialism, but mostly unacknowledged and even denied due to the links between race hierarchies and Europe's Nazi past. The taboos around race mean that European whiteness has become an 'invisible norm' (p.27). There are national and regional differences to this European whiteness, however, the norms of whiteness function to exclude those positioned a racially inferior across Europe (Arndt 2009).

With a few exceptions, such analysis has rarely been employed in a VET or adult educational context (Manglitz 2003; Closson 2010). However, a small body of work has employed notions of white privilege to argue that VET systems actually reproduce the structural disadvantage of racial minorities in the labour market and privilege whites. Extensive historical analysis of the labour market in the US suggests that regulated VET provision has resulted in the division of occupations along racial lines in order to protect white privilege (Roediger 1991, 2002, 2005). Roediger (2002) demonstrates that the term 'worker' itself is implicitly raced and gendered. This is, then, not only a question of skilled workers traditionally being white and male, rather Roediger describes a system in which race is an integral aspect of class formation, an integral part of worker identity. There were explicit fears of "a racially changed country" (Roediger 2005,5) with the influx of all the different ethnic groups, and talk of 'race suicide' among white Americans if they had 'too few' children (p.7). The function of this thinking has been to keep skilled, and more highly paid jobs for whites. Roediger (1991) refers to what he calls the 'wages of whiteness' - the way in which being white (or classified as white) pays. Similar hierarchies have been identified in European labour markets, for example Ha (2012) somewhat controversially argues that racial hierarchies have long shaped labour markets in Germany, from anti-Polish restrictions of the 1880's to prevent the 'Polonisation' of the German labour market, to the Nazi labour camps in which those considered sub-races were forced to labour, to the south European and Turkish guest workers of the post War era who did the lowest paid jobs in the worst conditions.

Studies which employ the notion of white supremacy or similar structural frameworks which link race inequality in adult learning with wider economic and social structures allow scholars to understand the wider context of white privilege and the way these social relations are reproduced. Shore (2010) argues that the learner in adult education in the Australian context tends to be framed as universal and neutral, without race, gender or class, however, it is implicitly understood that he is white and male, leading to the automatic 'othering' of female or minority ethnic learners. Equally, Johnson-Bailey's work (2006) on adult education programmes in the US employs a black feminist framework to show that although VET was employed by African Americans themselves in order to ensure cultural survival and resistance to the oppression they experience, it was mostly used to racially regulate society, ensuring that African Americans remained servile and subjugated. A rare study of apprenticeships and race in the UK argues that that 'ethnic and gender exclusion is central to apprenticeship structures historically' (Penn 1998, 259). The study shows that craft unions



and craft work in the UK have historically excluded women and ethnic minorities, including Irish and Jewish immigrants, a trend which continues: in the late 1990's, only 3% of modern apprenticeships were taken by young people from ethnic minorities, and only 11% by females. Avis (1998), in a study of 'white dominance' at an English Further Education college (institutions which provide both academic and vocational courses), found that many of the white teachers interviewed resisted positive discrimination policies which aimed to include more working class and minority ethnic people at the college, linking these to fears of societal breakdown if, as they saw it, standards were lowered to include these students. Avis links the teachers' attitudes to their perception of Britishness as white, which had a very real effect on the way in which they tried to keep this educational space white.

Some may argue that the notion of white supremacy is not appropriate to an analysis of the experiences of refugees. For example, it has been argued that it essentialises 'white' and 'black' experience (e.g. Cole and Maisuria 2007), whilst refugees come from several different regions and backgrounds, and individuals will be phenotypically very different. Secondly, the notion may be regarded as inappropriate because some refugees will be phenotypically white. However, both these points can be countered:

Inherent in these analyses is firstly, the notion of race as a shifting, historically located notion and thus also as a social construct. Secondly, white privilege does not refer to a skin colour, rather to a system of structural discrimination which shapes identities and interaction. Not all people classified as white are equally privileged, as whiteness is always gendered and classed (Ladson-Billings 1998; Shore 2000). As Roediger's (2005) work shows, in the US throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a hierarchy of jobs with whites at the top, immigrants from southern, eastern and central Europe (excluding Germany) at the next level, and blacks at the bottom. Roediger (2005) discusses what he refers to as the 'inbetweenness' of, for example, Italian, Slav, Jewish immigrants to the US, arguing that although they did not suffer the 'hard racism' experienced by African Americans, they were still raced. Thus, race can still be an issue for those with lighter skin tones. After the Second World War, these groups were able to 'become white', by which he means to be entitled to the same rights as white Americans. It could be argued that this 'inbetween' racial position is at present occupied by people of Latino heritage in the US, and could perhaps be applied in Europe to economic migrants from Eastern to Western Europe, referred to as 'xeno-racism' (Fekete 2001). As Arndt (2009) argues, European whiteness is also defined through race

hierarchies which position northern and western Europeans as superior to eastern and southern Europeans and the Irish, as well Jews. This is particularly important to consider when examining the case of refugees, because although some refugees are light-skinned, structures of white privilege will still contribute to shaping their social position.

Equally, some might argue that citizenship is a more important issue for refugees than race. However, there are close links between citizenship and race; indeed, citizenship is a raced notion (e.g. Ignatiev 1995). Those without citizenship, both in the US and Europe, whatever their actual phenotype, tend to be classed as 'outside whiteness'. Identities such as Germanness, Italianness and Britishness tend in the main to be understood as white (Wollrad 2005; Love and Vanghese 2012; Chadderton 2013), even though people of all ethnic groups have passports from these countries. This is similar across Europe, where concepts of citizenship are tied to notions of race, both in popular understanding and legally. In Romania and Denmark, racial notions are explicitly tied to national identity through 'jus sanguinis' (the principle of descent), which is used to determine citizenship rights as opposed to territorial principle of 'jus soli'. Germany operates a combination of jus sanguinis and jus soli, however a child born to two foreign nationals in Germany is still required to renounce one of their nationalities between the ages of 18 and 23, and Italy and the UK operate a more inclusive jus soli system of citizenship, although in all cases jus soli is still subject to restrictions for those whose parents are foreign nationals (for more details on these complex laws see e.g. Honohan 2012).

A small number of studies of refugees and VET argue that race is key to refugees' experiences of learning and work: Mojab's (2000, 2006) work on women refugees from the Middle East in Sweden and Canada takes a Marxist feminist approach which employs as a central framework the intersectionality of race, gender and capital. Such an approach allows an in-depth explanation of the ways in which the labour market is regulated, emphasising racism as integral to capitalism and education as shaped by the needs of the market, which is raced and gendered. Mojab's work demonstrates that the positioning of female refugees as passive partly due to their refugee status, but also their raced status as Middle Eastern females, meant that their previous experience in countries from which they had fled was devalued. Having previously worked as, for example, community and political organisers and resisters, nurses, technicians, social workers, the VET and/or the jobs which they are able to access in the host countries were mostly unskilled, and amounted to a 'de-skilling'

process. Niedrig and Seukwa (2010) argue that refugees in Germany are located in discourses which position them as passive victims rather than agentic, active learners in educational locations. The authors employ post-colonial theory to suggest that this disadvantaged social positioning is not only due to the refugees' refugee status, but their (perceived) post-colonial status in Germany. These studies suggest that VET functions to ensure the continued subjugation and exclusion from the labour market of those who are not politically designated as white, but also the continued privilege of those classed as white.

## **Methodology**

Experts in the field of refugee education were invited to take part in a focus group discussion. Five European countries were represented, these were; Germany, Italy, Romania, the United Kingdom and Denmark. The seven participants were not refugees themselves, rather they either worked for refugee charities or had conducted research on the topic of refugees and education in an academic context.

The aim of the research was to establish the benefits, or potential benefits of VET for adult refugees. The focus group was led by the two authors of this paper, and met for approximately 5 hours. The experts had been briefed on the research aim in advance, and had come prepared. Our role as researchers was to facilitate the discussion; we therefore probed over points which challenged our previous understandings or which needed clarification. The discussion was audio-taped and transcribed. Data was analysed according to the research aim and a report produced for CEDEFOP. Data was then analysed a second time, in order to draw out the issues relating to race, both implicitly and explicitly. A consideration of racial issues meant that our focus shifted from potential benefits to an analysis of structural barriers.

It is important to note the limitations to this study. Shortage of funds meant that we were only able to conduct a single focus group on this topic, which comprises a very wide field. The data we have collected is thus very thin. However, it resonates with other, similar studies, and should be regarded as a contribution to this wider debate. In addition, the voices of refugees themselves on their experiences of VET are missing from this study, and there remains a need to capture these in future research. A further problem with the methodology is that it was difficult to establish exactly which groups we were referring to, because 'refugee' encompasses a different group in each country we looked at, depending on the

country or culture from which the main groups of refugees come, and the recognition and status of a refugee's case.

It is also important to note that each of the countries in this study are home to different groups of refugees. The home countries and regions of the refugees vary from country to country, depending on history and political situation. For example, in the first quarter of 2011, most applications for asylum were received in the UK from Pakistan, Iran and Sri Lanka, in Romania from Tunisia and Pakistan, in Italy from Tunisia, Afghanistan and Nigeria, in Germany from Afghanistan, Serbia and Iraq, and in Denmark from Afghanistan and Serbia (UNHCR 2011). These asylum seekers come from several different backgrounds and cultures, and individuals are phenotypically different. Issues of race, then, will therefore play out differently in the various national settings, and impact differentially on different groups.

### **Structural barriers to accessing VET for refugees in Europe: results from the focus group**

Although we address these findings in separate sections for the purposes of this paper, they are inevitably linked in reality.

#### ***Vocational Training systems in individual countries***

Participants felt that the individual VET systems in the different European countries, although very varied, form barriers for refugees in themselves. In Germany, Denmark, Romania and Italy nations with highly regulated systems, and those which are more market-led, although there are opportunities for adults, the focus on Initial VET has to some extent been at the expense of Continuing VET, or Continuing VET is very integrated with Initial VET. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible in some professions and some regions, to enter as adult newcomers as many vocational routes are very inflexible. Adult education schools, such as Volkshochschulen in Germany, do provide some vocational and language courses, but provision tends to be intended as a support rather than a complete vocational qualification.

Participants mentioned that VET in the UK, although more flexible than in many other European countries due to multiple providers and entry points, is complex to navigate even for the indigenous population, and more so for newcomers. Training and education of all

kinds is becoming increasingly expensive and is thus increasingly out of reach for the socio-economically marginalised. It was also felt that the low status of VET may make it an unattractive option for refugees.

It was pointed out that the UK and Italy have a strong tradition of community education for adults, although neoliberal policies are making courses which do not provide a recognised qualification increasingly difficult to access or even run in both countries.

### ***The right to work and study***

A further key issue mentioned by all participants is the restrictions on paid work, training and study for refugees. This tends to involve restrictions on working, or studying for more than a regulated number of hours per week, either for a specified amount of time from when the individual enters the country, or until their status as refugee has been made official. In Germany, asylum seekers are not able to work until 12 months after entering the country. However, it was pointed out that a protectionist law restricts this right in practice, allowing the asylum seeker to take up the post providing it can be proved that no German citizen or foreign national with permanent residency status is available to fill the job (UNIYA 2003). Asylum seekers in Romania are allowed to work after one year and in Italy after six months, regardless of where their procedure is up to (ECRI 2006, 2012b). In the UK, asylum seekers do not have a right to work until they are granted refugee status subject to few exceptions (see also UKBA 2010). As there is a huge backlog of people who might have been waiting for up to 10 years for asylum, although this has situation has improved slightly, this is affecting a large amount of people for a long time (ECRI 2010).

### ***Programmes of advice and support for refugees***

Some countries have specific resettlement and integration programmes for refugees. Germany, Italy, Romania and Denmark (ECRI 2006, 2009, 2012a and b) have integration centres where refugees remain for 12- 18 months after their arrival. During this time, a portfolio is made of their competencies and skills, including an educational biography, certificates, diplomas, records of professional experience, formal and informal skills, intended to ease economic integration. Some centres also provide language lessons. However, participants felt that these centres have varying levels of success. It was reported that such centres might actually defer integration (see also ECRI 2006, 2009). In Germany, some centres are located in areas where there are high levels of racism (ECRI 2009). It was

pointed out that in Denmark there are limited places and some refugees are excluded. On the other hand in Italy there have been reports of bad conditions and even ill-treatment (see also ECRI 2012b).

In all countries participants observed a lack of advice on suitable professional routes, training and education. Support tends to be local rather than national, and it was pointed out that relevant organisations in refugee issues and education and training do not tend to talk to each other. It was also seen as an issue that much careers guidance tends to be school or university-based, and therefore inaccessible to most adult refugees. In the UK, Romania and Italy it was argued that NGO's, who provide much support to refugees, have insecure funding and agencies tend to come and go (see also ECRI 2006, 2012b). The UK representative reported on research she had conducted which suggested that organisations assisting refugees recommend them not to apply for mainstream VET and jobs, in order to try and protect them from discrimination. However, she suggested that this unofficial policy may have a further negative impact, preventing refugees from getting any education or training at all.

### ***Dispersal policies***

Some countries, including Germany, the UK and Italy, have introduced dispersal policies for refugees in order to spread the 'burden' to the authorities, as mentioned above (see UNIYA 2003; ECRI 2010). Participants agreed that this tended to mean housing refugees in municipalities where there has been a process of depopulation due to lack of work. Often therefore, refugees have good access to housing and schools, but in practice little access to jobs and training.

The German representative pointed out that in Germany, specific rules for 'tolerated persons' (those whose applications were denied but whose deportations have been deferred for legal or economic reasons) means this group is often unable to take up placements because of regulations which do not allow them to leave their district without permission (see also UNIYA 2003).

### ***Accreditation of prior and experiential learning***

Representatives from all countries mentioned difficulties with the official recognition of refugees' previous qualifications. Frequently, documentation and certificates have been lost in flight, and there are no official equivalency tests, although some bodies may be able to

provide this locally, representatives pointed out that in practice this is rare (see also ECRI 2006). Even where documentation from refugees' countries of origin could be provided, translation is expensive or not offered. Representatives also pointed out that even where documentation is provided and accepted, some form of re-education is normally necessary, frequently at a cost, and the refugee cannot start work at once. In addition it was argued that there is little recognition by providers or potential employers of informal learning and experience.

### ***Language provision***

Other research has shown that a key barrier to education, employment and training is proficiency in the language of the host country (Hannah 2003). However, representatives agreed that language provision is patchy for refugees to European countries. In Romania, Italy and Denmark language training is sometimes provided as part of the integration programme, however, lack of funding particularly in Romania and Italy means that these courses often do not exist (see also ECRI 2006, 2012b; NGO Network of Integration 2011). In Denmark courses are usually available for three years. It was also pointed out that Romanian as a Foreign Language training for teachers is not provided in Romania, thus the standards of teaching vary considerably. Non-Governmental Organisations provide language training free of charge in Italy and Romania, but cannot provide an officially recognised certificate of training (NGO Network of Integration 2011). In the UK, there is no statutory requirement to provide English courses, but until recently courses were provided to refugees for free by the Skills Funding Agency. This provision has recently been withdrawn, and now language courses are not cost-free, and concessions are only available to non-EU migrants. In reality courses are not always available (Rutter 2013). Germany does provide some subsidy for language courses for some types of refugees, not for others (ECRI 2009).

### ***Gender issues***

Representatives agreed that the provision there is for refugees tends to be geared more towards men than women, and observed that women are discriminated against when it comes to accessing VET or working. It was also pointed out that in Germany and Italy, VET courses tend not to have a part time offer, which often excludes those with caring responsibilities, mostly women. It tends to be men who can take advantage of full time work and training.

In Italy, it was argued, refugee women tend to be more successful in finding work than men, as there is a huge demand for women working in very low paid jobs in the care system. However, for many refugees, this kind of work does not represent their qualifications and experience, and as such it ensures they are trapped within a system which unskills them. Although this is a problem for men as well as women, participants felt it may be more significant for women.

### **Towards an analysis of white privilege in VET in Europe**

Although this was only a small study, and the findings mentioned above by no means constitute a comprehensive list of the issues, trends can be observed in our data which resonate with other studies. The participants mentioned inflexible VET systems, restrictions on paid work, training and study for refugees, patchy provision of advice, guidance and support, dispersal policies which prevented refugees accessing centres of employment and training, lack of official programmes of accreditation for qualifications gained abroad or for informal experience, patchy, underfunded language provision and lack of specific provision for women. Far from contributing to social inclusion, our findings suggest that VET systems and specific arrangements for refugees across Europe may actually contribute to and compound the social exclusion of refugees.

Despite certain differences across national settings, our project suggested that VET programmes across Europe tended to reinforce existing race hierarchies. Of course, as we argue above, this will be due to many factors, including refugee status and lack of citizenship. However, taking into account hegemonic discourses of white supremacy and the findings of other studies, it could also be argued that this may also be a racial issue: the lack of provision, or lack of *flexible* provision, in VET for refugees, may be integral to ensuring that white privilege is protected in the labour market. Equally, as we have argued, citizenship is a race issue. Thus the barriers to access cannot be regarded as individual, unconnected, policies or arrangements for refugees, rather, these conditions can be understood as the result structures of white privilege which ensure the regulation of the European labour market in favour of indigenous, white citizens. Therefore, both VET systems and provision for refugees could be seen as integral to the reproduction of racial inequality and white supremacy.



As we argue above, although much analysis of white supremacy is based on the US, which has a different racial and class history to Europe, recent studies have suggested that whiteness is a relevant concept for Europe as well. Indeed, Arndt (2009) identifies a shared European notion of hegemonic whiteness. Whilst, as we have argued, there are national differences between policies and approaches to VET, and to refugees, the outcome is similar across Europe. Raced discourses around notions of ‘productive worker’ and ‘citizen’ (Shore 2010,45) can be found across the western world, as can racialised assumptions around ‘behaviours associated with employable identities’ (p. 48), such as clothes, use of language and mannerisms. Studies suggest that there is widespread racial discrimination in the workplace in the UK (Jenkins 2010), Italy, (Kamali 2008; Merrill 2011) Germany (Kamali, 2008; Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi 2010), although it is notable that studies published on this topic are few and far between in all European countries except the UK. Unemployment is higher among all minority ethnic groups than among white people in the UK (Phillimore and Goodson 2006) and twice as high among foreign born than native born in Denmark (Olsen 2008). Statistics also show that the Eurozone financial crisis has resulted in far higher levels of unemployment among Europe’s minority graduates than their white counterparts (Keller 2012). Again it could be argued that these levels of unemployment are due to other factors: lack of citizenship in some cases, or possible lack of networks- but as argued above, barriers to employment are also linked to wider issues of race.

There are racial inflections to terminology and discourse throughout Europe and the (perceived) notion that indigenous (white) people are being ‘swamped’ or ‘flooded’ by foreigners with incompatible values is not uncommon in Europe, nor is the notion that white Europeans are dying out and being replaced by dark-skinned, economically unproductive religious fanatics (e.g. Plataforma PXC Catalunya 2010; Sarrazin 2010; Slack and Chapman 2006). These discourses, which explicitly link race and citizenship, are common across Europe, and as Roediger argues, these European discourses mirror those common in the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Moreover, it has been argued that the types of VET systems which have developed today have much in common with the VET systems which prevailed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Thelen 2004). Thelen explored the development of the capitalist systems in Britain, Germany, Japan and the US and argues that

industrial arrangements [...] which are forged in the rather distant past, actually *make* it to the present [despite] [...] the massive transformation of the political and economic landscapes [...] over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. xii original italics).

Her work demonstrates the resilience and durability of institutional relations, even in the face of great upheaval and historical breaks. Although she has not explored race, it is likely that racial inequalities, like other enduring features, will continue to be embedded in these institutions.

This shared European notion of whiteness therefore resolves itself differently in different national contexts, and certainly, as we have argued, both European and national notions of whiteness operate in education and training systems, national labour markets, and frameworks for refugees. Despite this, the outcomes for refugees in the countries we considered were similar.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have provided an initial cross country analysis of refugees' access to VET in Europe. Whilst there are clear limitations to the study, we have attempted to highlight the issue of race as a key factor in refugees' under-representation in VET, and shaping barriers to access. Whilst the under-representation will also be due to other factors, including nationality, refugee status and lack of familiarity with systems, an analysis which draws on other, similar analyses of white privilege in US and European labour markets, provides a context of race rather than just regarding the exclusion of refugees from VET in Europe as merely an issue of job formation. It allows us to understand the lack of support and flexibility around VET provision for refugees in capitalist societies as potentially related to structures and discourses of white privilege which shape notions of work and workers in Europe, as it has been convincingly argued they do in countries such as the US and Australia.

A study of VET and refugees also contributes to wider debates around the nature of race. Firstly, our study suggests race functions as a powerful political category, moving beyond more traditional understandings of it as a reference to phenotype. Equally, the study implies a paradox between the shifting nature of race and the enduring power of structures of white privilege. The study also reveals the potentially racial nature of discourses and arrangements which are often presumed to be race neutral, such as VET and citizenship.

More comprehensive, extensive and detailed analysis of white privilege in the labour markets of Europe is needed to give a clearer picture of the ways which VET systems might be shaped by racial structures. Equally, more research is needed which foregrounds refugees' own voices and compares refugees' actual experiences of accessing VET and in VET across Europe. Moreover, the current global economic crisis and the financial crisis of the Eurozone is exacerbating already depressed conditions in the European labour markets- there are fewer jobs and work placements, employers are less willing to take risks, and there is a massive reduction of funding for social and public care. More research is needed on the ways in which structures of white privilege and shifting notions of race might actually play out in VET programmes at a micro-level in comparisons across Europe.

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